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ABSTRACT

To develop an intensive preclinical experience for college juniors giving them "real" school contact and encouraging cooperative goal setting and planning among the public school and university staff, a study examined two revisions to the "junior block" program at Eastern Illinois University. This program provides students with 12 weeks of education classes followed by 4 weeks of actual classroom experience, and the revisions were as follows: (1) the teacher education students began their semester knowing the actual public school classroom to which they were assigned rather than waiting 12 weeks to receive that assignment; and (2) the public school staff were given major input into the students' college class instruction and experiences. The attitudinal change of the teachers during this experience was measured with the Semantic Differential. Results of this investigation indicated that: (1) the subjects terminated the experience with a positive attitude toward the new approach in the junior block program and towards their role in the preparation of teachers; (2) scheduling and placement changes improved the quality of the experience for the students; (3) the public school staff appreciated a heightened level of participation in the teacher education process; (4) communication among the important actors was increased; (5) the public school educators have become more willing to accept junior block students because they can be reassured of the quality of the experience for their classrooms; and (6) the university coordinator has gained entry into a practicum setting which will continue to provide much-needed placement opportunities for future teacher education students. (Four tables of data are included.) (MS)

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A University-Public School Experimental Practicum

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INTRODUCTION

"Collaboration" is the word for the day. Recent reports calling for teacher education reform recommend strongly that public schools and universities find ways to work together to develop better teaching candidates and to expand the pool of existing knowledge related to the preparation of successful future teachers (Joyce and Clift, 1984; Holmes, 1986; Carnegie, 1986). In this spirit, we began last year to develop an intensive preclinical experience for college juniors giving them "real" school contact and encouraging cooperative goal setting and planning among the public school and university staff.

The experience to which we refer is a modified version of the "junior block" program, six semester hours of education classes designed to provide practical preparation for teaching as well as actual classroom experience. The junior block program at Eastern Illinois University has been an essential part of the elementary teacher preparation program for many years. Typically, teacher education students spend the first twelve weeks of the semester in a class taught by the elementary education department (working with learning centers, reading series, unit development, and lesson plan preparation), and then are assigned through the office of student teaching to a public school classroom for four weeks of daily participation.

Our desire was to keep all of the best aspects of this program and improve it through two revisions: (1) the teacher education students began their semester knowing the actual public school classroom to which they were assigned rather than waiting 12 weeks to receive that assignment, and (2) the public school staff were given major input into the students' college class

instruction and experiences. During our planning of this project we also kept in mind the importance of having effective placements for the college students that would not impact negatively on the public school setting, so that all of the parties involved would benefit.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

Some examples of "collaboration" between university and school personnel, along with the benefits accrued, include the following:

1. Scheduling and Placement.

Activities. Students were assigned at the beginning of the semester, and were able to visit the teacher and classroom in which they would be working; therefore, all of their college class work (bulletin boards, curriculum units, reading series preparation, learning centers, etc.) could be geared for that experience.

Results. The university students' classroom and in-school experiences were linked, enabling most of them to operate far more successfully than students have in the past. They were able to develop a relationship with their cooperating teacher and the students in her/his class that was very similar to student teaching, thereby significantly easing their integration into the classroom. From the point of view of the university, the placements were made more quickly and were of a higher quality because of the advance preparation provided. And from the school person's view, the work of the teacher education students was better organized and more practical.

2. Public Educators' Input.

Activities. (1) During one of the planning meetings held prior to the initiation of this project, the cooperating teachers involved requested that a greater percentage of the student's grade be awarded on the basis of

in-school performance, reflecting the fact that this is a significant pre-student teaching experience.

(2) Two teachers were granted released time, paid for by the university, to teach the juniors in their college classroom prior to their coming to the school setting. Among the topics covered were various teaching strategies for reading, the use of arts-integrated activities, discussion of student services, the whole language approach to reading and writing, school routines, and the behavior program utilized.

(3) The principal, as well, spent a class period with the students, providing them with copies of the Parent Handbooks for each school involved, and discussing such issues as all-school curriculum units, special class schedules, dealing with parents, and various "professional" aspects of the world of teaching.

Results. The school teachers in the project felt more involved in the teacher education process because of the emphasis given to their judgment on student performance (grades for unit work, bulletin boards, learning center preparation, as well as actual teaching performance), and because several staff members functioned somewhat like "adjunct" staff at the university.

3. Communication.

Activities. (1) At the outset a steering committee was established as a vehicle to ensure ongoing communication between the teachers and the university coordinator.

(2) During the time that the students were in the schools, the university coordinator spent all of his time there as well, observing, assisting, and meeting with the cooperating teachers during their brief breaks from teaching.

Results. Having only two sites to supervise made it possible for the coordinator to better assist his students on an ongoing basis. And the steering committee mechanism enabled the teachers to readily communicate their concerns and gave the university coordinator an avenue to express his needs more easily as well.

ATTITUDINAL CHANGE MEASURE

In an effort to measure the attitudinal change of the teachers during this experience they were tested at the beginning and the end of the experience with the Semantic Differential.

The Semantic Differential represents a standardized and quantified procedure for measuring the connotations of any given concept for the individual. Each concept is rated on a seven-point graphic scale as being more closely related to one or the other of a pair of opposites (Anastasi, 1961, p. 534).

The following concepts were used: (a) ease of integration of participants into my classroom, (b) my role in teacher education, (c) organization and scheduling, and (d) supervision.

Findings:

Question #1. Does the new program make it easier to integrate the participants into your classroom?

Table 1
Ease of Integration of Participants Into My Classroom

Variable	Cases	Mean	Std Dev
Semantic Diff 1	14	38.571	14.914
Semantic Diff 2	14	68.214	3.760

The results of this study show an increase in mean gain of 29.642 on the second testing of the Semantic Differential, thus indicating strong approval of this part of the program.

Question #2: Is there a measureable change in the teachers' feelings about their role in teacher education?

Table 2
My Role in Teacher Education

Variable	Cases	Mean	Std Dev
Semantic Diff 1	14	50.785	16.862
Semantic Diff 2	14	68.571	3.567

The mean gain of 17.785 indicates that the teachers felt that they had more input into this program than in previous programs.

Question #3: Did the teachers feel that there was a change in organization and scheduling?

Table 3
Organization and Scheduling

Variable	Cases	Mean	Std Dev
Semantic Diff 1	14	58.857	11.002
Semantic Diff 2	14	68.214	3.043

The results of this question indicate that the subjects terminated the experience with a mean gain of 9.357, thus indicating a positive attitude toward the ease of organization and scheduling.

Question #4: Did having one university professor assigned to the building to supervise all of the students make the task easier?

Table 4
Supervision

Variable	Cases	Mean	Std Dev
Semantic Diff 1	14	46.285	14.035
Semantic Diff 2	14	66.714	4.084

This study reveals that the experience did affect the attitudes of teachers toward the supervision of their participants. The mean gain for this question was 20.428.

Conclusions:

The results of this investigation indicate that the subjects terminated the experience with a positive attitude toward the new approach in the junior block program and toward their role in the preparation of teachers. Personal comments from the subjects indicate that the experience was considered to be both exciting and the most beneficial of their preclinical supervisory experiences with Eastern. Comments such as, "these students remind me of student teachers," and "I hate to see the practicum end," were common statements.

Probably the greatest influence on the quality of a field experience is the cooperating teacher; in a sense, the student is an apprentice and the cooperating teacher is a master teacher. Thus, the positive attitude the teachers had with regard to this experience is symbolic of the success of this program.

SUMMARY

The modified version of the junior block experience resulted in a more satisfactory experience for all involved. The scheduling and placement changes improved the quality of the experience for the students, the public school staff appreciated a heightened level of participation in the teacher education process, and communication among the important actors was increased. As a result, the public school educators have become more willing to accept junior block students because they can be reassured of the quality of the experience for their classrooms, and the university coordinator has gained entry into a practicum setting which will continue to provide much needed placement opportunities for future teacher education students.

The outlook for this kind of program is positive; all involved have given it their endorsement. While we are far from our ultimate goal of developing collaborative structures with all of the components of the Clift and Say (1988) "reciprocal model," we are confident that this experiment in public school--university cooperation is a step in the right direction.

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